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VZ, CO
SUBJECT: GOC TO FACILITATE NEW FARC HOSTAGE RELEASE,
REBUFFS FRENCH EFFORT TO SEEK RENEWED ROLE FOR VENEZUELA

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer.
Reasons 1.4 b and d.

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) President Uribe said the GOC will facilitate the possible release of four more political hostages held by the FARC, including allowing Venezuelan helicopters to use San Jose de Guaviare airport. Peace Commissioner Restrepo told us the February 21 meeting with Uribe and French FM Kouchner was "cordial but frank." Uribe rebuffed three French attempts to discuss a renewed Venezuelan role in facilitating a humanitarian accord. Restrepo will meet secretly with the French, Spaniards, and Swiss in Panama on February 26. The Spanish are wary of the French and Swiss, and expect little to come from the Panama meeting. END SUMMARY.

GOC WILL FACILITATE NEW HOSTAGE RELEASE

¶2. (U) President Alvaro Uribe confirmed on February 23 that the GOC has located the four political hostages set to be released by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), but added that the Colombian military would not interfere with their release. Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos had previously announced that the GOC had located the four--Gloria Polanco, Luis Eladio Perez, Orlando Beltran, and Jorge Eduardo Gechem--south of San Jose de Guaviare, and near where Clara Rojas and Consuelo Gonzalez de Perdomo were released on January 10. Santos said Gechem was in "grave" physical condition, and urged his immediate release. Gechem's family announced they will travel to Caracas on February 27 with Senator Piedad Cordoba in the expectation that the FARC will release the four in the near future.

¶3. (C) Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo told us the hostage recovery operation would likely follow the model used in the FARC's release of Clara Rojas and Consuelo Gonzalez, including the use of San Jose de Guaviare airport by Venezuelan helicopters. The GOC would not try to impose new conditions due to the intense domestic and international

interest in the four hostages' release. Santos told the Ambassador he had publicly announced the GOC's knowledge of the hostages' location to prevent the FARC from blaming Colombian military operations for delaying the release or from attributing Gechem's death to GOC obstructionism. On February 25, Venezuelan Interior Minister Ramon Rodriguez Chacin accused the GOC of carrying out "intense military operations" that were complicating the FARC's plans for release.

TENSE GOC MEETING WITH FRENCH OVER VENEZUELA

¶4. (C) Restrepo told us the February 21 meeting between President Uribe and French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner was "cordial but frank." Kouchner proposed the creation of a group of countries, including Venezuela, to facilitate a humanitarian exchange. Uribe responded that this was not the time to talk about Venezuela. Restrepo said Kouchner tried to raise Venezuela two more times during the meeting, only to be rebuffed by Uribe. In an interview with weekly news magazine "Semana" published February 24, Kouchner said "Chavez is key to liberation of the hostages . . . and we think President Chavez has played a positive role up to now."

¶5. (C) Restrepo said Uribe pressed Kouchner on what France might contribute to a humanitarian accord, as well as his proposal to encircle the FARC unit holding the hostages and to negotiate their release. Kouchner repeated French skepticism about encirclement, but said France would contribute economic support and would also accept some FARC members as part of a negotiated solution.

GOC TO MEET FRENCH, SPANISH, SWISS

¶6. (C) Restrepo told us he will secretly meet with the three European facilitators--France, Spain and Switzerland-- in Panama on February 26 to discuss the way forward on humanitarian negotiations. The GOC has authorized Swiss representative Jean Pierre Gontard and French representative Noel Saenz to meet the FARC. Uribe told Kouchner that after such a FARC-Euro meeting, the GOC could consider a possible role for Cuba, as well as Brazilian President Lula da Silva, in support of the European effort.

¶7. (C) Separately, Spanish DCM in Bogota Pablo Gomez de Olea confirmed the Panama meeting and predicted little would be achieved due to lack of consensus among the three European countries. Gomez said the French are increasingly desperate to obtain the FARC's release of Ingrid Betancourt, see Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez as key, and are prepared to act without GOC authorization or knowledge. He said the French would gladly pay the FARC in exchange for Betancourt's freedom and would also agree to seek the FARC's removal from the EU terrorism list. The problem is that the FARC does not want money for Betancourt. Gomez added that the French have put Spain in an increasingly difficult position by demanding that Spain choose between supporting France or Colombia.

¶8. (C) Gomez told us the Swiss are more moderate than the French, but are also capable of acting without GOC authorization. The Swiss are not bound by the EU's terrorist list, and allow a FARC representative to operate in Switzerland. Gomez said Spain believes individual Latin countries do not have the stature or credibility to play a role in a humanitarian process. Still, Spain believes the OAS could assume such a role under the right circumstances, making it important to preserve OAS interest and credibility.

Brownfield